

Cities leading charge to save energy

Debra Gruszecki • The Desert Sun • April 18, 2010

Sustainable living is an issue that's on the minds of many Coachella Valley residents and communities.

The subject has taken root at all levels, spearheaded in part by a sustainability pledge the mayors of all nine cities signed at the Coachella Valley Energy Summit in Palm Springs in 2009 to up the ante on green living.

The pledge nudged many communities off the starting block to comply with Assembly Bill 32, California's aggressive plan to cut carbon emissions to 1990 levels by 2020.

It began with an inventory on greenhouse gas emissions, the results of which are expected to be published in late spring or early summer.

But it hasn't ended there.

Across the valley cities are forging their own paths on many fronts.

There are solar panels; efficient air-conditioning units; water-stingy irrigation heads; energy fairs; buyer rebates for energy-efficient appliances; e-waste and used-oil recycling; lifestyle changes for homeowners that boil down to the basics, like a light bulb; building retrofits that save taxpayer dollars.

Report card

One year into the pledge, Coachella Valley Association of Governments environmental resources director Katie Barrows beams with pride.

"The cities are focused and enthusiastic for green and sustainable living," she said.

"Their efforts to promote that have gone forward in huge amounts this year — better than expected, given the economy.

"I think the valley is really unified, and recognizes its potential to be a showcase for sustainability and renewable energy."

To Barrows, it's no surprise.

"The valley has a history of environmental stewardship," she said. "We've already been recognized as a success in terms of air quality. Our regional coordination is state of the art."

The cities of Palm Desert, a pioneer in programs that began with a series of firsts — from curbside recycling and allocated golf cart lanes on public roads to LEED-certified government buildings — and Palm Springs, with its call one year ago for sustainability pledges and its announced formation of the iHub incubator for 50 clean-tech companies, have led the pack.

"But the valley could be doing more," said Palm Desert Councilman Jim Ferguson, who has played key roles in shaping legislation to advance a green energy economy and conservation for the 21st century.

Green machine

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Few would dispute that greening up the valley needs to be perennial.

But Michele Mician, who joined Palm Springs as its sustainability manager last September, said tremendous strides have been made in recent months. "A lot's happened," she said.

One initiative that's come online is the Desert Cities Energy Partnership with Coachella Valley cities, Blythe, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians and utility providers — Southern California Edison, Southern California Gas Co. and Imperial Irrigation District — to offer incentives for retrofits that conserve energy and move toward sustainability.

The goal?

Save 1.2 million kilowatt-hours.

Helping cities make those improvements are the Federal Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant funds from President Obama's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

The federal money is being tapped in some cases to make city building upgrades or for climate action planning, and at the same time, capitalize on the Desert Cities' rebate program.

Regional cooperation

The Desert Cities Energy Partnership is a prime example of regional cooperation, Barrows said.

One of its programs offered Coachella Valley residents who live in the Southern California Edison utility area a \$535 rebate on energy-efficient, variable-speed pool pumps that were installed from September through December 2009. The rebate was funded by the California Public Utilities Commission.

Over that time, 842 pumps were installed — saving 1.4 million kilowatt-hours of electricity.

Several cities offered added rebates or fee waivers for the pool pump installations, including \$300 rebates each in Rancho Mirage and Indian Wells.

"It was a great program that helped reduce our carbon footprint" and spurred the economy, Barrows said.

Mician said it will take partnerships across the board — including the community — to make it work.

"Government can't do it alone," she said. "The partnerships will be key to save energy, water, resources overall to ensure we meet the climate change mandates and that we're prepared for whatever comes our way."



The Palm Desert Visitor Center is a LEED-certified building. (Desert Sun file photo)

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